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ABSTRACT

Presented by the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) are background information and a policy statement on the employment of blind and otherwise visually impaired persons. Briefly traced are the former graditional employment of blind persons in sheltered facilities and in occupations such as piano tuning; the emergence of the blind as an effective labor force during World War II; and subsequent enlargement of employment opportunities (largely resulting from veterans' blindness) through governmental action such as the 1954 Vocational Rehabilitation Act. The stated AFB policy recognizes the progress made in empolyment opportunities and proposes that institutions of higher learning and other training facilities offer the visually handicapped the same opportunities offered other students for learning, preparing for a career and meeting performance standards. In addition, the statement maintains that any attempt by statute, regulation, or practice to bar a visually handicapped person from employment due to visual loss is arbitrary, discriminating, and inharmonious with the current social concept of equal opportunity. (MC)

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Policy Statement

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BACKGROUND

As late as the turn of this century, those few blind persons who were employed were found mostly in sheltered facilities and in such occupations as piano tuning, broom making, and chair caning. A few totally blind graduates of schools for the blind achieved competitive employment. Of that small group, the number of congenitally blind was very limited. The majority were blind persons with a past history of work who had established themselves prior to their loss of sight. Those with no work history, with the exception of a few very remarkable persons, had difficulty in relating to a work environment. Public prejudice, based on a lack of understanding of the potential of the blind worker and his successful contribution to commerce and industry, forced many blind persons to seek sheltered employment experience. In spite of the efforts of a few pioneer placement persons, there was little progress, even with the few blind persons who were recruited to meet the crucial labor shortage presented by World War I. However, at the War's end, most of those blind persons employed were relegated to their original status.

Between the wars, a small group of pioneers established some employment opportunities; independent retail stands, and placement in industry and agriculture. The manpower crisis which emerged with the start of World War II enabled blind persons to demonstrate their effectiveness in a wide variety of jobs in business, industry, and professions. The time was opportune and the movement was accelerated by the 1943 amendment to the Vocational Rehabilitation Act which motivated the states to take leadership in many directions. Placement methods were maturing and agencies serving blind persons began to initiate new and expanded programs designed to provide evaluation, training, and employment to rehabilitation clients.

The employment of blind persons at the end of World War II remained relatively stable. Many of those whose employment was terminated by cutbacks to peace time production were placed in jobs in other industries and new employment opportunities were developed on a sound placement and followup basis. Rehabilitation agencies began to recognize the need for training programs as a means of capitalizing on and

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stabilizing the gains in the labor market. There was a growing awareness that if blind persons were to compete successfully they had to be trained competently and in a broad range of programs away from the traditional stereotypes. Thus challenged, forward looking professional workers accepted the charge to plan in terms of preparing and placing clients selectively according to each individual's interests, aptitudes, and abilities, and were motivated to seek out new employment opportunities.

As so often in history, violent wars which had destroyed so much sight became an impetus for initiating, modifying, and improving programs for blind persons. During World War II there were several developments that contributed to increased employment opportunities for blind persons Action by the federal government including the coverage of blind persons by workmen's compensation, and statements and policies on employment of the War Manpower Commission and the Civil Service Commission; A change in attitude on the part of the public, organized labor, industry, and insurance companies; and the large increase in the number of blinded veterans trained by the armed services and later by the Veterans Administration.

In 1954, Congress again amended the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, greatly expanding the program to stimulate public and private agencies to the development of more comprehensive service and to provide for the training of personnel and allocating of money to research and demonstration. Rehabilitation and treatment centers, workshops, diagnostic programs, and comparable facilities and services were increased or created in all parts of the country. New training programs and employment opportunities were in fact opened for blind and otherwise visually impaired persons.

POLICY

The American Foundation for the Blind recognizes the progress made to date. However, it believes much more must be done. Blind and otherwise visually impaired persons should receive opportunity throughout the economy, in both the private and public sectors, equal to that of other similarly qualified persons in selection for, appointment to, and advancement in employment. The Foundation further believes that every blind and otherwise visually impaired person should be afforded maximum opportunity to prepare for his career by meeting the accepted standards and preparation for his chosen vocation.

Institutions of higher education and other training facilities should offer blind or otherwise visually impaired persons the same opportunities for learning and career preparation as they

do other students, and should, as a matter of regular practice, require from them the same standards of performance.

While a blind or otherwise visually impaired person's methods and techniques of performance may through necessity differ occasionally from those of seeing persons, the end result should be measured in terms of total satisfactory accomplishment. Under such conditions, there can be no basis for discrimination in monetary compensation, employment, or opportunity for employment for which the individual is qualified.

The American Foundation for the Blind states unequivocally that any attempt by statute, regulation, or practice to bar a blind or otherwise visually impaired person from employment because of visual loss per se is arbitrary and discriminating, and not in harmony with current social concepts of equal opportunity in our culture today. Although many gains have been made, there must be no lessening of effort to continue to break down barriers to the employment of blind or otherwise visually impaired persons and to increase opportunities for the fullest possible range of employment. The Foundation and all agencies for blind or otherwise visually impaired persons must be constantly alert to the changing nature of employment in our constantly changing society.

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